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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies information to assist the prospective student in evaluating programs and institutions of higher education through the development of a reporting format, a "consumer's guide," that lends itself to easy analysis and interpretation. In addition to cost, retention, and placement success information usually suggested by consumer protection groups, the consumer's guide includes data for institutional and program evaluation, and focuses attention on the data necessary for student consumer admissions decisions. (Author)

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A NEW CAVEAT: LET THE BUYER BE AWARE

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A NEW CAVEAT: LET THE BUYER BE AWARE

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In spite of the general reluctance on the part of educators to recognize or accept the academic and marketplace parallels, economic theories and concepts are finding their way into education with increasing regularity and intensity. Consumerism, the latest of the concepts from the marketplace to be applied to education, gives the promise of a new reckoning for educators with the theoretical and practical intrusions from the world of commerce.

Consumerism and Edcuation

There are several reasons to believe that the age of the consumer has come to education whether or not educators are ready and willing to accept Consumerism as an operating principle. First, Consumerism, the protection of the consumer from inequitable treatment by the vendor, is a cause or right many will champion and few will argue against (Arnstein, 1974). Second, the student, because of his time, energy and financial investment, has won the uncontested role of postsecondary educator's primary consumer (Shulman, 1976; Willett, 1975; El-Khawas, 1975). Perhaps the most obvious reason that consumerism will become an educational as well as an economic concept, however, is the fact that consumer advocate groups and state and federal governmental agencies have already developed rules, regulations, and legislation to protect the student as a consumer (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1975; Education Commission of the States, 1973; Shulman, 1976; Willett, 1975; Peterson, 1970).

While some academicians, true to their calling, will debate the definitions and others will fret over the appropriateness of a 12-month or 12,000 mile guarantee on college degrees, or recalling graduates with "defective parts" or other cynical analogies to "consumerism," the real concern of educators should be in correcting the abuses which make the student a consumer in need of protection (Dykstra, 1966). The fact is that nowhere has the old caveat, "Let the Buyer Beware," been more assumed than in education. At least in business there was the countering, if not often prevailing, attitude of "The Customer is Always Right." Unfortunately, there are now generations of educational consumers who have come to believe, if not know, that the "student is never right." The question is no longer whether the concepts of consumerism will apply to the relationship between the student and the postsecondary institutions: but rather how the student will be assured of his consumer rights.

The Basics of Consumerism

Consumerism is based on the philosophical conviction that the consumer and the vendor meet in the marketplace as equals (Willett, 1975).

Equitable treatment for the consumer is embodied in four basic areas of consumer rights, and it is the protection of these consumer rights that the consumer movement is all about (Education Commission of the States, 1974).

1. The right to safety or protection in the purchase of a good or service; including the right to hold accountable the person or organization to whom the consumer pays his money.

2. The right to choose; including the right to participate in the decision making process which establishes the relationship with the vendor.
3. The right to be heard; which implies a system for negotation and arbitration of disputes over the consumer vendor relationship.
4. The right to be informed; to have access to all pertinent information which might affect the consumer's decision to buy.

While each of these rights is important and has significance in the consumer movement it is the right to be informed - full disclosure as it is also known - that has come to be regarded as the focal point of consumer protection, more likely than not because it has been lack of information which has caused problems in consumer safety, decision making and protection (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1975). It is on the premise, generally regarded as true, that consumers are best protected when they have full knowledge of their "consumer rights" and responsibilities, that the new caveat "Let the Buyer Be Aware" is proposed for the postsecondaty education marketplace.

Full Disclosure and Postsecondary Education

Without apparent exception, all of the reports, conferences, and regulations to implement consumer protection for students include recommendations for the release of complete and accurate information about the institution to the student or prospective student which might influence the student's decision to attend or accept offers from a college. The implication of the various recommendations, and the

general conclusion of several investigations, has been that too little attention has been given to the information needs of the student[1] (Education Commission of the States, 1975; Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education 1974, Jung, 1975, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1975; Willett, 1975; Education Commission of the States, 1974).

Unfortunately, most of the information now available to students is lost in the public relations rhetoric of catalogs and recruiting brochures. Other pertinent information never finds the printed page and is released reluctantly, if at all, only upon insistent direct questioning. In fact, one gets the impression from reading most college publications that "hard data" is systematically avoided (Dykstra, 1966).

Everyone knows, of course, that decisions about where to go to college and what to study are probably more emotional than rational. But then, given more objective information on which to base the decision the student may be less prone to rely on subjective factors (Dykstra, 1966). In any event, the student's decision must not be based on insufficient institutional data.

Consumer and Information

The reverse side of the assumption that consumers are wise enough to make good decisions if they are provided with accurate information is the awareness that the complexities of today's products - and product decisions - make it virtually impossible for the average consumer to become expert enough to fully utilize the information, accurate though it may be, to protect himself in the marketplace

(Education Commission of the States, 1974). The inability of the consumer to interpret complex product information or to make meaningful comparisons or decisions on the basis of the information has prompted some to suggest that the government will have to assume the function of "interpretor" for the consumer (Education Commission of the States, 1974).

The frightening prospect of further government involvement in the reporting and interpreting of educational data coupled with the obvious need for more meaningful educational information for the student consumer, prompts this proposal for A Consumer's Guide to Education.

A Consumer's Guide to Education

The proposed Consumer's Guide to Education deals only with the identification of information for the prospective student to use in evaluating programs and institutions, and the development of a reporting format that lends itself to easy analysis and interpretion by the student. The purpose of the Guide is not to rate institutions, but it should facilitate institutional and program comparisons. Much of the information the Guide will present is probably already collected and reported in one form or another - although probably not in one place - while other information may present some collection problems for many institutions. The illustrative material which follows, while not exhaustive, is intended to be an example of the data that could and should be reported by the institution in a straightforward manner in A Consumer's Guide to Education. Particular interest in paid here to the data relating to full disclosure of academic programs and to

related student, faculty cost and resource information: areas which are most subject to in sufficient data and misinterpretation.

Institutional Identification and Directory Data. In addition to the current official corporate name of the institution, and the location of the main campus and the name of the partent institution if a branch campus, a complete cnronology of critical institutional dates (founding date, first coursework, first degrees, name changes, etc.) should be provided to the student consumer.

Institutional Control, Affiliation and Corporate Status. Although the eight basic types of institutional control used by the U. S. Office of Education are generally recognized as being descriptive for reporting institutional control, an explanation of what "control" means is needed as not all states, municipalities, religious groups or corporate entities "control" in the same fashion. This is particularly true for private institutions where terms such as "affiliated" or "associated with" or "sponsored by" which have no clear or commonly understood meaning, are used to describe a college-church relationship. Proprietary schools should state all corporate relationships, parent corporations, holding companies, etc.

Composition of Governing Boards. While it may be informative to have an actual listing of names of people on the Governing Board of the institution, it would be more helpful to have a statement of the special qualifications required for board membership, how the members of the board are selected, and what constituencies they represent. It is often possible to get a better reading on the "control" of an institution by knowing how its Governing Board is selected, than by

knowing its public, private, or corporate status. Proprietary schools should list the owners and/or principal stockholders.

Institutional Accreditation, Licenses, on Approval. The statement of institutional accreditation must include which of the six regional accrediting associations has recognized the institution, and the type of accrediting (full, candidate, 4 year college accredited as junior college, provisional, covered under the regional accreditation of parent instituton) awarded to the institution by the association. Note should also be made of the highest program levels offered, and specifically those which have and have not been accredited or approved. Schools not covered by the accrediting associations must state the authority, licensure, or approval under which they offer educational programs.

Institutional Purpose, Objectives, Goals. The statement of institutional purpose, objectives, or goals, should be clearly stated and easily understood. It is recommended that the purpose, objectives or goals be stated in a style which is easily interpreted into specific outcomes. The student should be fairly certain after reading the statement of goals what he can be expected to do as a result of the educational experience.

Institutional Evaluation. Institutions should state the methods and procedures it will use to determine whether or not the stated institutional purpose, objectives or goals are being met. Obviously the methods and procedures of evaluation will have to be tied to the stated purpose, objectives and goals, hence the previous suggestion of behaviorally stated outcomes.

In addition to the reporting of institutional self evaluations, educational audits or evaluations by outside groups (including accrediting reports) should be available to the student.

In one form or another, the institution should state how well it is performing its mission, and how that performance has been determined.

Requirements/Qualifications of Faculty and Administration. An indication of the ability of the faculty and administration to accomplish the objectives of the institution is an important aspect of institutional evaluation. If specific requirements and qualifications other than those usually expected for an academic appointement (such as church affiliation) are required of faculty or administrators, they should be stated. Statistical data summarizing the qualifications needed for faculty and administrators to accomplish the stated institutional goals should be reported. In most cases the summary should include the highest earned degrees of the faculty.

Other Faculty Data. Statistical tabulations of faculty and administration data should include the number of faculty by rank and function, length of service at the institution, age distributions, tenured faculty, and tabulations by sex and race. It is assumed that a complete listing of faculty, including their qualifications and their responsibilities, will be available to the student, although probably in another document.

Curriculum and Program Data. The Consumer's Guide to Education is not intended to replace the college catalog as a source listing of courses and course descriptions, or the detail of major and

institutional requirements for degrees. There is an obvious need, however, to make the information in the catalog closer to reality. The resemblance between course description and course content is too often only coincidental, and the courses listed in the catalog should only include those that have been taught in the last several years, or have an honest chance of being taught in the near future.

The Guide would include a statement of the calendar type (quarter) semester, 4-1-4, trimester, etc.) and the approximate dates of the beginning and end of each term. Semesters, for instance, can be quite different in concept depending upon when they start and end. Information on majors and academic programs should include: the type of professional accreditation held, if any (in addition to regional accreditation); the number of courses offered in the major area and the number of those courses taught during the last year; the total number of faculty qualified in the area and the full-time equivalent faculty teaching in the major during the past year; the degrees awarded or certification offered for completion of the major or program; the number of hours or courses required in the major for completion; and, the average number of years (or terms) needed to complete the program or a degree in the major.

Information on majors and academic programs should also include the number of declared majors; the number of recent graduates or program completers; the basic ability levels; and the grade point averages of students in each major or program; and averages on "exit" tests.

Student Data. Some important student data has already been described with the curriculum and major program data, but clearly more information on student characteristics needs to be provided. Strange as it may seem, information other than raw totals or averages on students is generally not available. The following data should be provided.

Enrollment. Enrollment by sex, race, age, full-time, part-time, matriculation status, residence, and class should be provided for the most recent fall enrollment period.

Socio-Economic Characteristics. Descriptive data in the socio-economic background of the student body, generally available from ACE, ACT or SAT summaries on entering students, should be reported for prospective students.

Admissions Requirements. All of the requirements and considerations for admission should be clearly stated, including the dates and deadlines for application and acceptance. The amount of any fees, nature of any fees or deposits and fee refund or waiver policies should be clearly stated.

Ability Levels of Entering Freshmen. Frequency distributions of the admission test scores, high school grade point averages, or other ability measures or indices, should be presented along with the mean and median scores for entering freshmen. If regional, national, or similar insitution averages are available they should be reported as well.

Predicted Student Success. First quarter predicted grade point averages are frequently used in the admissions process, and when they are the prediction equation should be made available to the student. In addition, it would be possible to prepare a chart which would allow an easy approximation of the predicted grade point average for the prospective student.

Student Achievement. Grade distributions by class, major, or department and student class rank by grade point average is information that could give the prospective student a notion of student attainment and institutional expectation. Simple distributions of the data should be provided.

Student Retention/Persistence. Data on the number of students who start and complete programs at the institution, along with figures on the number of students who enroll from previous quarters should be available in the Guide. In addition, reported student reasons for leaving the college should be provided.

Ability Levels of Program Completors. Frequency distributions of the same ability criteria used in admissions and reported for entering freshmen should be made for the students who have successfully completed their programs or degrees. Obviously the student's scores won't change, but the difference in the distribution scores for entering and exiting students can be revealing.

Measures of Program Completor's Achievement. Senior comprehensives and "exit" exams of various types are coming back into vogue as the issues of program and institutional evaluation and accountability become more important. The institution needs to state the methods and

procedures it uses in evaluating the programs it offers, and report the results of the measures it uses to determine the success of the programs, including the scores of its graduates on various nationally normed tests by program, major, or degree.

Where appropriate, success rates on bar exams, medical boards, licensure tests, admissions to graduate and professional schools etc., should be reported.

Placement and Alumni Data. Closely related to the data on the achievement of program completors is the information about what graduates do after college. Proprietary schools face more demands for such information than do colleges and universities, but the demand for more job related information for graduates is increasing for all postsecondary institutions. The information on placement of graduates should reflect those who have positions, those who have positions in their field of study, those who don't have positions, those who don't have positions but are looking for positions, those who aren't looking for positions, and those who intend to make a career of their present work, as well as information on how their college work relates to their employment.

Tuition, Fees and Costs. In view of the fact that most institutions are seeking more than a one-year commitment from the student, it would seem only reasonable for the institution to project the anticipated cost to the student over the entire length of the program. Obviously tuition and fees will be subject to change, but the changes in fees and tuition aren't as unexpected or unplanned as most institutions would have students believe. (If increases are unplanned or unexpected that

says something about the quality of financial planning at the institution). Guaranteed tuition plans are all but gone now, but a projection of anticipated costs over a two or four year period need not be a cost guarantee, nor a commitment to single levels of cost over the period projected. What is needed is an indication of what the cost increases are likely to be, and those cost projections are or should be a part of the planning of all institutions.

In addition to the tuition, activity fees, deposits, etc., that are required of all students, any special fees associated with a given program, e.g. music fees, uniforms, laboratory fees, must all be listed. As the special fees are often buried in the catalog, all cost data in the Guide would be reported together.

In those cases where the student is required to room and/or board in institutional housing, special note should be made so the student will include that cost in his planning.

Estimates of costs of books and supplies and any personal living expenses should be provided based on the averages for currently enrolled students. Such data is used in determining financial aid at most institutions and should be reported.

Institutonal Finance. For the curious or cautious student, a complete current audit report of the institution should be available for examination: most students don't need that much information to get a feel for the solvency of the institution. However, basic financial information reported to all students should include a statement of revenue and expenses showing dollar amounts and percentages for each of the typical revenue and expense classifications and a balance sheet.

Particular emphasis needs to be placed on the percentage of revenue generated by tuition, and the percentages of expenses going toward instruction. Someday, perhaps, auditor's statements (and accreditation reports) will tell the public more than that the books and records are kept according to accepted standards, and report specifically on the financial position of the institution.

Student Rules and Regulations. Although it may not be necessary to give details of dorm house rules, etc., specific rules and regulations affecting the student's rights to continue his enrollment should be clearly stated. It is also important that the methods and procedures of setting student rules and regulations be spelled out in detail and that the student know the procedures of being found guilty of breaking the rules, the consequences, and the appeal procedures.

Conclusion

More likely than not, this first attempt at A Consumer's Guide to Education is a bit like a twelve year old's first reading of Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex but Were Afraid to Ask: It's more than he wanted to know even if he known what to ask in the first place. The point is, that as educators and researchers, we have known more about education, institutions, and how students mix with both than we have told or than has been asked. We need to find a way to get that knowledge to the student without turning them to total abstinence or complete promiscuity.

Footnote

[1]A notable exception is the work being done by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education through their project on better information for student choice of college.

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